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ABSTRACT

Historically, men's and women's roles in China have been highly structured. The People's Republic of China has stressed the importance of women overcoming historical oppression and has adopted policies aimed at emancipating women. When the Chinese Communist Party took control of China in 1949, the new government clearly stated the importance of improving women's place in society. The traditional view of women's roles still exerts power on contemporary society. Government policies addressing inequities have included the Marriage Law, collectivization of tasks which tied women to the home, and re-education of family members in an attempt to equalize domestic tasks within households. Equal pay is mandated by law, but the extent to which this is enforced is debatable. Although constituting a significant part of the labor force, women are not proportionately represented in the professions. In contrast to the United States, the Chinese strategy for promoting equality for women has been spearheaded by the government. Propaganda and ideological dialogue have been used to promote change. These strategies while perhaps not sufficient in the shortrun, may be necessary for lasting change. (ABL)

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The Role of Women in Chinese Society[1]

Historically, men's and women's roles in China have been highly structured. But the People's Republic of China (PRC) has stressed the importance of women overcoming historical oppression and has adopted policies which have aimed to emancipate women. In the spring of 1986 I visited China with a delegation of psychologists. In this paper I have attempted to piece together my observations, the anecdotal reports of the Chinese men and women with whom I spoke, and my readings in the area to arrive at some picture of women's roles in Chinese society.

The Position of the Founding Government

When the Chinese Communist Party took control of China in 1949 the new government clearly stated the importance of improving women's place in society. The All-China Democratic Women's Federation, founded six months prior to the October 1949 takeover, became a part of the new government and has continued to play a key role in encouraging women to redefine their domestic and public roles, in formulating government policy, and in converting new rights into standards of social behavior (Croll, 1978). The first law to be passed by the new government was the Marriage Law of 1950, the intent of which was to insure rights for women in the context of the family. The first constitution of the PRC, adopted in 1954, contained an article reading: "Women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life, political, economic, cultural and social, including family life" ("China's Report," 1985).

The Signs of Tradition

Pre-revolution China has been considered one of the most oppressive of societies for women. The Chinese view that women are inferior dates as far back as Confucius, who is believed to have said that "Women indeed are human beings, but they are of a lower state than men and can never attain to full equality with them" (Burton, 1911, p. 19). Without a doubt old traditions still have a hold on contemporary Chinese society. For instance, male infants are the definite preference of most rural and some urban couples. Educational opportunity seems to vary for the sexes. Though at the lower educational levels, boys and girls are represented in equal numbers, disparities at the upper educational levels are evident, with females accounting for only 40% of junior and senior middle school students and only 25% of university students (Zhai, 1986).

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Government Policies to Address Inequities

The Marriage Law represented a revolutionary change in traditional views and thus rights of the sexes. This idealistic law met with much opposition in the years following its adoption. In response to this opposition, educational and legal campaigns to popularize and implement the Marriage Law were undertaken between 1950 and 1953, in the hopes that they would set in motion a process making people more conscious of the cultural determinants of gender inequality (Johnson, 1983).

During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1959) many of the tasks which kept women tied to the home were collectivized and, especially in urban areas, have become an integral form of social production in China (Andors, 1983). In rural China the commune effectively mobilized rural women, necessitating such collectivized services as cafeterias and child care facilities. However, the entry of large numbers of women (90% were earning a wage of some kind; Croll, 1983) into the work force did meet with some resistance. The Women's Federation, noting this resistance, mounted an intensive campaign to explain to the entire family the benefits of working women (Andors, 1983). When, for a variety of reasons, the wide-scale establishment of collectivized services failed to diminish women's domestic responsibilities, the government subsequently attempted to re-educate family members and to attempt to redistribute and equalize domestic tasks within the family household.

Progress and the Workplace

With respect to conditions for women in contemporary China, equal pay is mandated by law. The extent to which this policy has been enforced is, however, debatable. According to one source (Robinson, 1985), women workers are more subject to cutbacks during employment crises, are occupationally segregated, tend to receive lower wages than men, and are employed in greater numbers in collective, and generally poorer, enterprises.

However, women do constitute a significant portion of the labor force: In cities and towns, very few women are not employed full time (Croll, 1983); 36% of the total urban work force and about half of the rural labor force are women ("China's Report," 1985). However, the sexual division of labor in urban employment is still based on the premise that women are better suited for work in certain industries than others (Croll, 1983). For example, at a textile factory we toured the large majority of workers, probably 90%, were women. In China, as is common elsewhere, as the educational level increases, the number of women employed decreases; only 26% of associate and assistant professors and lecturers at college level are women (Croll, 1983).

Women seem to hold some important positions in China. They are well represented (though not proportionately) in the professions from medicine and engineering to teaching, and this has

not led to a downgrading of these professions (Croll, 1983). It seems that far more women than men serve on neighborhood committees; persons elected to these positions are charged with addressing family planning and contraceptive use, with mediating disputes among persons in the neighborhood district, and with overseeing the day-to-day affairs of the neighborhood.

In an article published in the Beijing Review in 1979, Chinese women discussing women's status arrived at this conclusion: "In the thirty years since liberation, the social status of women has fundamentally altered....Equality between men and women is guaranteed by law. Women are playing a larger role in politics, industry, agricultural production, culture and education and have a bigger say in family affairs. But the attitude that men are superior to women still persists" ("Chinese women discuss," 1979).

Conclusions

From the above it might be concluded that China is not much closer to achieving equality between the sexes than is the United States. Yet, there are some interesting differences between Chinese and American strategies to address inequality between the sexes which I think warrant discussion.

First of all, the movement for equality of women in China is distinctive in that it is spearheaded by the government (Hare-Mustin & Hare, 1986). And, as Croll (1983, pp. 1-2) has noted: "Legislation in support of women's rights is common enough, but a unique element of the Chinese strategy to redefine the position of women has been the role assigned to education in popularizing women's rights and the institutions established in support of the new legislation." That is, the Chinese have utilized what they unabashedly term propaganda to bring about the changes targeted by their legislative reforms.

Another component of Chinese attempts to address cultural resistance is the ideological debate of certain periods. For instance, ideological debate was an important component of the 1973 to 1976 anti-Confucian campaign. During this period even the most sensitive issues concerning women's biological function and familial roles were subjected to public discussion and analysis (Andors, 1983).

The unique strategies promulgated by the PRC include governmental leadership and a focus on education and ideological inquiry. These pursuits seem important in spurring changes in practices that are supported by deeply ingrained and long-held attitudes and traditions. Thus, the strategies adopted by the PRC, while perhaps not sufficient in the short-run, may be necessary to bring about lasting change.

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